From Byzantium to Ballymun

A review of *Literary visions of multicultural Ireland: the immigrant in contemporary Irish literature.* Ed. Pilar Villar-Argáiz. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. Pb 2015. 273 pps.

A book like *Literary visions of multicultural Ireland: the immigrant in contemporary Irish literature* has been long-awaited, and since its publication the topic of migrations has become more burning than ever. That the phenomenon of immigration is more striking in Ireland than in many other countries is due to several factors, the most striking of which would be that Ireland has (1) known a centuries-long history of emigration, (2) an almost equally long history of being colonized and (3) a small population on a much divided island. In *The Ex-Isle of Erin* (1997) O'Toole punningly catches the inversion of the above situation as the tradition of 'exile' has been replaced by mass immigration while the country has been 'un-islanded' in its embrace by the EU's vaster network of (mainly) continental countries.

This densely printed book contains 18 contributions divided over four parts: Part I deals with 'Irish multiculturalisms: obstacles and challenges'; Part II ''Rethink[s] Ireland' as a postnationalist community'; Part III focuses on ''The return of the repressed': 'performing' Irishness through intercultural encounters'; Part IV, finally, looks at 'Gender and the city'. In this review I will first present the Irish sociological background as sketched by the contributors, then discuss each of the literary genres scrutinized in this book and conclude with a general assessment.

That Ireland has undergone major changes since Mary Robinson became president is obvious. As the country's 'predominantly agricultural economy' turned into 'a hi-tech multinational one' it became 'the most globalized country in the world'. The women's movement and the Good Friday Agreement (1998) helped to make 'the old landmarks …disappear. The twin towers of southern Irish identity – Catholicism and Nationalism – [are] teetering' (qt. O'Toole 18); and migration brought about a more variegated population: '1994 was a year of net emigration, a decade later one out of every 10 people living in Ireland would have been born in another country' (Hegarty qt. in Clark, 265).

Such sea-changes call for reflection on the new population mix in Ireland. Theoreticians distinguish between different kinds and degrees of multiculturality. Ronit Lentin warns that 'A multicultural approach runs the risk of creating separatist ethnic groupings, leaving the structures of power intact while fixing the boundaries between the majority and the minority' (11). Kearney and Kiberd also criticize such 'ethnocentric nationalism' and foster 'civic nationalism' instead. Edna Longley pleads for 'cultural exchange' rather than 'cultural coexistence'; not a 'para-cultural' but an 'inter-cultural project' 'engaging with genuine differences and making them fruitful'' (qt in Estevez-Sáa 79). Bolzano thinks more in kitchen terminology when she distinguishes between three kinds of multiculturalism: the 'melting pot' (the American tradition), the 'salad bowl' (or cultural mosaic, the European form) and the 'pickles in a jar', where migrants are kept in a physical and administrative kind of limbo (235). Distinctions could be further fine-tuned when one considers the personal level where people can be full of racial prejudice, yet not racist. Racial perception can be ingrained, as Bisi Adigun notices: 'I have yet to see an Irish theatre production where a black actor comes on stage to play a role that has no relevance to his/her skin' (14).

A key publication in the field is *Metro Éireann*, a multicultural newspaper founded in 2000 by Abel Ugba and Chinedu Onyejelem featuring stories based on race issues. Ronit Lentin, an Israeli Jewish woman who researches on immigration in Ireland, Fintan O'Toole and Roddy Doyle are regular contributors.

It seems that in order to come to civic nationalism two conditions must be fulfilled: first, we have to acknowledge 'the facticity of difference' (11); second, we should acknowledge the Other in the self. The latter exercise is the harder one, and here most people follow Kristeva and W. Welsch's concept of 'transculturality', implying that 'recognition of a degree of internal foreignness is a necessary condition for the acceptance of the external foreign' (qt. in Schrage-Früh 163). The crunch of the matter is of course that the boundaries between the familiar and the foreign are forever shifting, and that one has to be aware of the 'necessarily fictive natures of all nationalisms' (qt. Kiberd in Poloczek, 135)

This book is put together in the belief that literature can change conventional world-views (14) and it hopes to raise some critical controversy. For the first time, the editor tells us, there is enough material, even a profusion of literary works by Irish-born writers dealing with immigrant characters (15). Indeed this book covers a vast corpus of works; one contributor discusses no less than seven novels. Some texts are discussed in several papers, such as Hugo Hamilton's novels (Carmen Zamorano Llena, Margarita Estévez-Saá and Jason King), and Doyle's *The Deportees*, but as the approaches remain different this is no problem. Each contributor focuses on the immigrant in examples of one genre, so we will now look at how the genres reflect multicultural Ireland.

I will start with **drama**, as this seems to be the genre with the longest tradition in transcultural politics. Charlotte McIvor's article touches upon the origins of Irish community arts in the Troubles of the 1970s, including theatre, music, dance, circus, street performance, fine and visual arts. She also discusses some inner-city initiatives in areas riddled with drug abuse and poverty, where increased access to the arts involved training in some practical job skills (38). Fringe theatre experimentation was started up in Dublin, Drogheda, Waterford and Galway. Most famous are the Calypso Productions (1993), providing new issue-based writing for theatre; most quoted are Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle, who together rewrote *The Playboy of the Western World*. Like Fishamble, Upstate theatre, Tower of Babel and others, these companies all want to provide 'spaces of genuine meeting and hospitality between old and new communities in Ireland' via 'music, dance, painting, poetry, drama [and] story-telling' (Poloczek 134)

Paula Murphy's contribution focuses on a more specific project. The concrete towers of Ballymun, a disaster of social engineering, were creatively explored by Dermot Bolger. To cover the building of these blocks, their 'domestication' and their demolition the author needed not one play but a whole trilogy. In her essay on *The Ballymun Trilogy*, Murphy focuses on questions of authenticity and form. That Bolger actually lives near the area and read his 'Ballymun Incantation' at the real-life demolition of one of the towers is a strong example of the interconnectedness of literature and social reality. The play's form is interesting too: that 'The same actors play Irish characters in the first act and immigrant characters in the second' (151) dramatically illustrates how the self and other are one. Also interesting is that all the actors remain on stage for the duration of the play, 'functioning as a sort of internal audience' and a 'Greek chorus' (160). The play clearly illustrates how identity is never absolute but context-related. When the son of one of Ballymun's re-immigrating inhabitants arrives in Dublin he notices 'I only felt truly English the day I flew into Dublin and saw how Irish people viewed me as a foreigner. Before then I thought I

looked obviously Irish' (156). Murphy also indicates how migration can offer a liberating alternative for those whose family contexts are constricting them (by feuds or local social prejudice); it gives them not only more financial leeway and wider future perspectives, but also a space to rethink their past more imaginatively. One of the protagonists recharges the old symbols with positive energy: 'My name is Eileen Redmond. I was born in Ballymun on Whitsuntide, when the Holy Spirit descended.' (158) Here Murphy illustrates how Bhabha's 'Third Space' works, which 'constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation' (156) which change and allow the meaning and symbols of culture to shift – in this case, the old symbols give some lustre to the protagonist's difficult life.

In Loredana Salis' discussion of Dermot Bolger's *The Parting Glass* (2011) transculturality is the saving grace, as Bolger's returning Irish emigrant is supported by his half German son Dieter, who 'does not need to belong', while 'You Irish are so desperate to belong and yet desperate to escape' (251). Salis also discusses Paul Mercier's unpublished *The Dublin Trilogy* (1995-98) which is original in the time jumps between acts (dealing with Irish history from 1969 back to 1900). Sebastian Barry's *The Pride of Parnell Street* (2007) was originally commissioned as part of the Amnesty International 'Stop violence Against Women' campaign by the artistic director of Fishamble Theater Co. (247), which shows in the play's focus on Ireland's 'capacity for self-destruction', itself the result of a 'pervasive form of cultural neo-colonialism' (249).

The essays in this book dealing with contemporary Irish **fiction** look closely at degrees of interaction between Irish and New Irish, or immigrants. In this sense Amanda Tucker is not unanimously positive about Doyle: she thinks *The Deportees* (2007) reflects 'corporate multiculturalism' which merely shows 'some degree of visible difference from an implicit white norm'(53). Claire Keegan's 'Walking the Blue Fields' does not get a too positive review either, as the Chinese healer in the story gets neither a name nor a word in, remaining more 'a presence rather than a participant' (54). Emma Donoghue's *Landing* (2007) and Cauvery Madhavan's *Paddy Indian* (2001) score more highly, the first because it shows that love is too simple a solution for the complications of everyday life (especially as they are caused by systemic inequalities of gender, race and geography (58)). Madhavan is praised for her replacing binary oppositions by transculturation and hybridity while illustrating (implicit) racism in a wide range of situations.

When looking at *The Deportees*, Eva Roa White is more positive, noticing a shift from multiculturality (disconnected and passive coexistence with ethnic minorities) to 'interculturalism' (active exchange) which starts a 'process of identity migration'. More than in his multicultural version of *The Playboy*, White thinks that Doyle's construction of new 'innerscapes' for Ireland offers a wonderful 'contribution to antiracist work in Ireland' (96).

In his essay on one of the most famous new Irish, Hugo Hamilton, Jason King also compares the contemporary to tradition. Hamilton, 'doubly excluded for being too Irish and not Irish enough at the same time' (179) is observed to come to an epiphany of less high-flown proportions than Joyce, but therefore maybe more gripping: 'I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don't have to be like anyone else.' (*The Speckled People*, qt.180). So Hamilton 'transforms Joyce's modernist idea of the epiphany as a profound moment of artistic self-revelation into one of cognisance of cultural difference' (177).

With Wanda Bolzano's essay on Emer Martin's *Baby Zero* we move to more feminist issues. The book is set in 'Orap', or Eoraip (Irish for Europe), i.e. a fusion of Europe and a Middle-Eastern state. Thus the place descriptions illustrate how binary oppositions do not

characterize the difference *between* cultures but different aspects *of* most cultures. Here, the aspect both the nationalist-Catholic Ireland and the tyrannical middle eastern state have in common is a never-ending cycle of patriarchal violence. Yet in *Baby Zero* this circle is broken when the protagonist is rescued from execution by her mother Farah who is a correction to the Alcestis myth in the sense that the mother will take her daughter's place. The essay is peppered with great quotes from the novel: 'I asked them why when they persecuted men for religion or colour, it was viewed by the world as oppression, and when they persecuted women, it was dismissed as tradition' (232).

Equally feminist is Maureen Reddy's discussion of Clare Boylan's *Black Baby*, situated in the process of revising Irish motherhood. This process was boosted with Ailbhe Smyth's 1994 *Women's studies in Ireland: A Reader*, in which Gerardine Meaney's 'Sex and nation: Women in Irish culture and politics' was a much noted essay. On the basis of that reader Reddy concludes that Boylan's book is a 'parable of liberation with Alice as an every Irishwoman' (227), and she concludes that the self cannot find itself without the detour over the Other: 'Boylan's *Black Baby* suggests that a true intercultural interrogation could gain Irishwomen real freedom and therefore the possibility of true intimacy' (228).

Anne Fogarty analyzes six short stories, an ideal genre 'to explore contemporary flashpoints' (123). Inspired by Ricoeur and Kwame Appiah, Fogarty focuses on how the 'confrontation with the ethnic Other' figures as a means for 'excavation of indigenous racism' (121) in each of the six stories. Edna O'Brien's 'Shovel Kings' (2011) shows how 'the difficulties of living as a migrant forever suspended between cultures often leads to 'emotional stultification' (124) and how the host population alternates 'between fascination and disengagement' (125). Toibin's 'The Street' (2010) is a transnational story, highlighting the 'rules of survival and belonging' of a Pakistani community in Barcelona, which also highlights the mechanics of scapegoating in Spanish society (125). The most charming story is Mary O'Donnell's 'Little Africa' (2008), in which a Nigerian boy is invited to play Balthasar, the black Magus, in the school Nativity Play, which empowers him to give a speech about freedom and equality, thus helping him towards the 'happy end' of a transnationally reconstituted family. Fogarty helped me see the point of Enright's 'Switzerland', where the partners 'enact a mock warfare in which each ironically cites ethnic stereotypes to seduce the other' (128). I was delighted to find at least here one short story by Colum McCann, an author who is otherwise curiously absent from this book. Indeed, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' (1994) is the typical story in which the silent Japanese immigrant completely fails to trigger an identification of the villagers with their own emigrated family. (127). Finally, Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's 'The Shelter of Neighbours' highlights how 'the insidious silences of Irish society' (130) lead to 'tragedies that underpin carefully maintained social facades'. Against this attitude the author pits Appiah's cosmopolitanism which demands 'respect for legitimate difference' implying the task to 'dislocate Irish pieties about self, family, community'. This, Fogarty argues, is an urgent request, as 'Ireland has largely ignored the recent social engineering in the interests of neoliberalism and global capitalism' (122).

O'Donnell's discussion of Keith Ridgway's second novel, *The Parts*, according to Battersby 'the most convincing Irish comic novel since *At-Swim-Two-Birds*', dislocates Irish pieties all right. After having observed that the Irish (like R.B. Sheridan, Daniel O'Connell, Roger Casement, Bob Geldof and Bono) seem to sport great empathy with blacks, the essay describes Joe Kavanagh, protagonist of *The Parts,* as 'an Irish Everyman'(192) who 'has racial stereotype but … is not racist' (197). The events described are humorous indeed, portraying the immigrants as the dignified ones, sympathizing with the clumsy but warmhearted Irish.

The essay by David Clark, one of the great specialists in Irish crime fiction, does not lack humour either. One of the narrators notices that 'the situation in Northern Ireland was changing: 'the paramilitaries still kept control of the rackets; ordinary decent criminals didn't have a look in, but competition from Eastern Europeans was starting to bite'' (Neville qt. in Clark, 265). But we also get insight into the essentials of crime fiction: 'Racism, like sexism, is … in fact a cornerstone of that fiction's ideological orientation.' (Reddy qt. in Clark, 257).

Villar-Argaiz' own contribution focuses on three poets, the Northern Irish poet Colette Bryce, Maynooth-based Mary O'Donnell and Michael O'Loughlin who, having returned home after having lived in Spain the Netherlands and France, is one of the New Irish. Her analysis of Bryce's magnificent poem 'The Word', which conflates the story of Christ with that of the immigrants in Ireland is very interesting as it focuses on the stylistically clever use of plurals and capitals which illustrate the theological idea that Christ is in each person, especially in disadvantaged ones. The myth of Christian martyrdom returns in Mary O'Donnell, only she goes back to the more political form of martyrdom required by the likes of Patrick Pearse. But his call for commitment, as the one to the contemporary questions of multiculturality, is not heeded, as the Irish in O'Donnell's punchline manage to remain 'openly inattentive' 'try[ing]… to recall older struggles: …/ We remember the war we took no part in.' (70) Michael O'Loughlin finally goes back to 'Róisin Dubh', the old symbol of Ireland, but only to say that the Irish rose 'inherited the imperialist attitudes' (75). To oppose the 'monovocality' of Irish society O'Loughlin speaks via the fictional Latvian voice of 'Norgelis', but he too succumbs to the bigger structures embodied by Tesco, where he works, forcing him to partake in the push for profit and payment (73).

Schrage-Früh's selection of poems also reflects the Irish denial of the effects of British colonial rule, which aimed at making the Irish feel strangers in their own country. 'That ordeal is something which even the stay-at-home Irish have in common with refugees and asylum-seekers' (164), yet the hosts do not seem to empathize with the newly arrived. Yet poets like Bolger can still pick up moments of interaction, as in his poem 'On the 7 am Luas to Tallaght' where people 'swapping words in ten languages for tiredness'. Here, the villanelle is found to be 'ideally suited to capture the tired refrains produced by a half-asleep mind' (169).

That Sinéad Morrissey figures in different essays on the migrant in poetry is not surprising, considering that she spent a few years in Japan and a few other countries, only to come back to Belfast where she would eventually become the city's first poet laureate. Both Charles Armstrong & Katarzyna Poloczek discuss her poem 'Tourism', but while Poloczek follows Kearney and Kiberd, stressing the idea that cultural creation comes from hybridization (142) – as in Morrissey's 'foreignising, world-traveller's attitude' (137) - Armstrong gives his analysis a more philosophical slant using Heidegger and Kristeva. Further, Poloczek discusses a witty poem by Leontia Flynn, 'Dublinia' by Mary O'Malley, and '*Survivor'* by Michael Hayes. It is no wonder that Hayes' 'succinct, haiku-like poems, operating upon the imagist tradition' (145-6) win a lot from his cooperation with the African painter Jean 'Ryan' Hakizimana. But apart from gaining in image-power, Hayes' exposure to other cultures also led him to reappraise his own language, so he had his poetry translated into Irish. So here the difference between languages (iconic and verbal, African, English and Irish) may bring about 'a new enabling aesthetic ideology' (134). Armstrong's take on things is more related to tourism. He distinguishes between the traveller who is 'good' because his journey turns him to introspection while the tourist is 'bad' because he merely consumes what he is told (201). Yet the difference is fluid: while Derek Mahon calls Dublin a 'Georgian

themepark for the tourist' (204) he also indicates that even the traveller cannot escape from this consumer culture: 'Geared up in Klein and Nike, Banana Republic, Gap,/ we are all tourists now and there is no escape' (205). Kristeva's idea that 'the foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners' (205) is further illustrated in Mary O'Donnell's witty poem 'Les Français Sont Arrivés, Die Deutschen Auch', where the tourists set off a more active process of self-questioning (208).

To conclude, *Literary visons of multicultural Ireland* is a very interesting book and useful for anyone who teaches contemporary Irish literature. I only have three points of minor criticism. First, more attention to formal aspects would have been welcome. I understand that the main purpose was to offer a mosaic of literary works, and their introduction took up much space, but they will certainly invite the reader to make a further formal analysis. Second, theories could, ideally, have been elaborated a bit more. When Kristeva, Homi Bhabha or Saïd were mentioned their views were usually limited to a one-liner. Third, I missed some authors in this book, but that was only to be expected as the material is so vast. Yet when Kearney sees Irish nationhood as a 'triple-layered identity', consisting of the state, the expatriate abroad, and the regional communities within (18) I miss the regional rural entity, which might have been illustrated by Donal Ryan's (formally interesting experiment of) *The Spinning Heart*. Also, Colum McCann might have figured more visibly, though Anne Fogarty's analysis of one of his short stories shows some vital aspects of his essentially multicultural narratives.

Apart from the richness of views offered in this densely written collection, a very positive aspect is the 'unity in variety'. The editor, Pilar Villar-Argáiz, did a splendid job. While all the main literary genres are represented, the recurring motif of the 'Other in self' keeps them all interwoven. This is especially striking in the recurring references to Yeats, more specifically to 'The Second Coming'. In Michael O'Loughlin's poem 'A Latvian Poet Reads Yeats's *A Vision* in the Oliver St John Gogarty', Yeats's poem is cleverly rewritten: 'But the Beast is dead and/ We have come crawling like vermin / Out of its cold fur' (75). Novelists like Mary Rose Callaghan also refer to Yeats when one of her characters asks 'What strange beast's stalking the land? They call it the Celtic Tiger, but it's some evil spirit of racism' (82). Emer Martin's *Baby Zero* situates the Beast in Europe's pernicious orientalism-inspired interference: 'Yes, there is a monster coming over the hill, but it's us. So how can we run? We have to face ourselves.' (qt. in Balzano, 232)

It would be interesting to compare this book to similar studies on other countries in the EU. Tucker rightly remarks that 'Racial prejudice is not the sole domain of the Irish but rather a part of every culture' (61). Chinedu Onyejelem's criticism of the Irish authorities for 'continuously allow[ing] … several thousand people to remain in limbo' sadly echoes the Belgian situation, as does the rest of his observation: 'Many of these people are able-bodied and ready to work, but are not allowed to do so. As such, they are forced to remain on social welfare and be seen as good-for-nothings by many Irish people (qt. in Balzano 235).

But there is hope. As this book on Literary visions posits from the start, we do believe that literature can help to steer politics into a more encompassing view of the self-Other interactions which form each individual and each culture. And each of these contributions holds up texts which aim at an 'Ireland of the future' which 'will no longer be considered 'as a nation that … *includes* Others', but as 'a nation *of* Others'' (qt. M. Hickman 77) which implies that 'Irish pieties about self, family, community' will be dislocated and refreshed.

This will happen through the work of both Irish and ‘New Irish’ writers, and as Pilar Villar-Argaiz’ book shows, there are many.

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